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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN ROMA: LOST IN (NON)INTEGRATION

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: As Roma communities across Bulgaria commemorated International Roma Day, the government sluggishly moved to update the 1999 Framework Program for Roma Integration. Ten years after the adoption of the government's first policy document on Roma integration, results are meager. Roma continue to live largely in isolated communities, receive low quality education in de facto segregated schools and suffer disproportionately high unemployment. According to government officials, the new draft Framework Program emphasizes social and economic issues, which are now viewed as primary obstacles to Roma integration. Whatever the merits of the government's new initiative, Roma are not impressed. Some Roma groups charge their recommendations to policymakers were ignored. They suspect the government is readying what they term another empty document, with typically uncertain prospects for implementation, in a sensitive and politically charged time ahead of national elections. END SUMMARY.

PIONEERING, BUT SLOW-MOVING 1999 FRAMEWORK ON ROMA

¶2. (SBU) Adopted in 1999, the Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma is the first strategic document in which Bulgaria's post-Communist government outlined its major policies and principles to integrate Roma over a period of ten years. It included measures to prevent discrimination, encourage employment, desegregate Roma schools, improve housing and healthcare, ensure Roma access to media, as well as to preserve and promote Roma culture and ethnicity. Developed with broad Roma participation, the document formed the basis for numerous government action plans. But, the government did not allocate specific budget to implement goals, instead relying heavily on funding from international donors, such as the World Bank, the Soros Foundation, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and others.

¶3. (SBU) By far the government's most serious accomplishment from the list of measures in the Framework Program is the 2003 adoption of anti-discrimination legislation. Roma NGOs were among the first and most active applicants in court under the new law. They are also among the most frequent petitioners to the Anti-Discrimination Commission, established in 2005 to enforce the law. Citing figures that only 65,000 Roma were officially registered to receive unemployment assistance in 2008, government officials insist that unemployment among Roma has dropped significantly. Officials attribute this progress to a number of programs implemented by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy aimed at improving Roma qualification and increasing their competitiveness on the labor market. Officials also talk up the government's recently-enacted policy to limit timelines for social welfare, which they claim broke the cycle of dependency and encouraged Roma initiative. These conclusions drastically conflict with the views of NGOs, which the government accuses of purposefully inflating statistics to attract donor funding. In the area of housing, the NGOs criticized the government for delaying the development of architectural plans and the building of infrastructure in Roma neighborhoods.

THE GRITTY REALITY TEN YEARS LATER

¶4. (SBU) Despite ongoing integration efforts, around half of Bulgarian Roma, roughly estimated at 800,000 or slightly over 10

percent of the country's population, live in segregated ghettos. These neighborhoods are populated by shanty-style illegal homes, which are below basic sanitary standards, with makeshift electric wiring and no running water. Roads in these neighborhoods are often unpaved and ad-hoc. Recent immigration from smaller towns to larger cities, particularly Sofia and Plovdiv, has only increased the strain on Roma neighborhoods. Almost 70 percent of Roma attend de facto segregated schools. Roma children are also disproportionately represented in state run institutions for children, which have faced stinging criticism recently for poor care and conditions. In part due to the low educational attainment and discrimination, Roma continue to face significant challenges in the labor market. According to NGO reports, unemployment amongst Roma in some areas is as high as eighty percent. (The vast disparity in NGO and government statistics has much to do with political agenda-setting, but also the methodological quirks and anomalies of how unemployed are registered and counted.) Interestingly, Roma in rural areas are moving into homes in towns and villages virtually abandoned by the ethnic Bulgarian population - part of the consequence of the huge demographic changes underway here as part of the countryside essential de-populates.

THE ROCKY ROAD AHEAD

15. (SBU) In July 2008, the Government started to update the Framework Program, due to expire in 2009, with broad involvement of Roma NGOs, who were initially encouraged by the government's invitation to participate in the working group. Early optimism soon gave way to disappointment when Deputy Prime Minister Emel Etem, who chairs the government's council coordinating ethnic and demographic issues, restructured the working group to reduce Roma representation

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from 16 to 4 NGOs. Most Roma boycotted the working group leaving only one person as the representative. The community grew even more frustrated with the government's drafting process when the deadline for completion was postponed by five months to April 2009. Some Roma activists worried that Roma issues would be exploited for political purposes in the upcoming election campaign without any tangible benefits for the community.

16. (SBU) Government officials expect cabinet ministers to approve the new Framework Program ahead of the election campaign due to start in mid-May. Arguing that Roma remain marginalized from mainstream Bulgarian society because of poverty and poor educational skills, officials stress in the new draft the need to develop social and economic policies for poor families regardless of their ethnicity. The new strategy includes provisions for pre-school education for bilingual children to complement the recent decentralization of school budgets and management. To address housing, officials strive to encourage local municipalities to make funds available for lower-income families, including Roma. Like the 1999 Program, the current draft is not backed up with a specific financial commitment and relies on each Ministry and municipality providing resources amid competing priorities. Some Roma activists criticize the government's draft as lacking specificity and vision to address future economic challenges. They also charge the document does not recognize Roma as a separate ethnic group, nor takes into account the role of discrimination against them. Some go as far as charging that the draft is itself discriminatory. Meanwhile, Bulgaria's small but vocal nationalist/populist parties perpetuate stereotypes against Roma, and claim the government is doing too much for Roma.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite continued friction over the substance of the new Framework, government officials joined with Roma to commemorate International Roma Day in various events around the country. Ambassador McEldowney issued a public statement calling for reaffirmed commitment and concerted effort on the part of the government, civil society and business to advance tolerance and equal opportunities. The latest drafting effort clearly illustrates

the difficulty of developing a much needed consensus policy to integrate Roma. Even once a document is hammered out, its implementation will be an even greater challenge. End comment.

Karagiannis